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What is a prayer labyrinth?

Question: "What is a prayer labyrinth? Are prayer labyrinths biblical?"

Answer: A labyrinth is a path which leads, via a circuitous route, to the center of an intricate design and back out again. A labyrinth's route is unicursal; that is, it has only a single path. Unlike a maze, a labyrinth is designed for ease of navigation, and it is impossible to get lost within one.

A prayer labyrinth is a labyrinth used to facilitate prayer, meditation, spiritual transformation, and/or global unity. The most famous prayer labyrinths today include an ancient one in the cathedral of Chartres, France, another in the cathedral of Duomo di Siena, Tuscany; and two maintained by Grace Cathedral, an Episcopal church in San Francisco. While prayer labyrinths have been used in Catholic cathedrals for centuries, the past decade has seen resurgence in their popularity, especially within the Emergent Church and among New Age groups and neo-pagans.

Labyrinths have been used by a wide variety of cultures for at least 3,500 years. Evidence of ancient labyrinths exists in Crete, Egypt, Italy, Scandinavia, and North America. Ancient labyrinths had what is usually called the "classical" design of seven rings, or circuits. They were decidedly pagan in function: many labyrinths were dedicated to a goddess and used in

ritualistic dances. The Hopi Indians saw the labyrinth as a symbol of Mother Earth, and the hundreds of stone labyrinths along the Scandinavian shoreline were used as magic traps for trolls and evil winds to ensure safe fishing.

In the Middle Ages, the Catholic Church adapted the labyrinth for its own purposes within its cathedrals. The classical form gave way to a more intricate design of 11 circuits in 4 quadrants, usually called the “medieval” design. Within Catholicism, the labyrinth could symbolize several things: the hard and winding road to God, a mystical ascension to salvation and enlightenment, or even a pilgrimage to Jerusalem for those who could not make the actual journey.

The modern “rediscovery” of the labyrinth and its use in church settings is celebrated by groups such as The Labyrinth Society and Veriditas, The World-Wide Labyrinth Project. According to these groups, the labyrinth is a “divine imprint,” a “mystical tradition,” a “sacred path,” and a “sacred gateway.” The stated purpose of Veriditas is “to transform the Human Spirit,” using “the Labyrinth Experience as a personal practice for healing and growth, a tool for community building, an agent for global peace and a metaphor for the blossoming of the Spirit in our lives” (from the official Veriditas website).

According to Veriditas, walking a prayer labyrinth involves 3 stages: purgation (releasing), illumination (receiving), and union (returning). Purgation occurs as one moves toward the center of the labyrinth. During this stage, one sheds the cares and distractions of life and opens his heart and mind. Illumination occurs at the center of the labyrinth; this is the time to “receive what is there for you” through prayer and meditation. Union occurs as one exits the labyrinth and involves “joining God, your Higher Power, or the healing forces at work in the world.”

Proponents of prayer labyrinths speak of using the labyrinth to become enlightened, realigned with the universe, and increasingly empowered to know one’s Self and to accomplish the work of the soul. Some, such as Dr. Lauren Artress, president of Veriditas, also speak of the “many levels of consciousness” which touch the worshiper in a labyrinth, including the consciousness that he is “one of those pilgrims walking in the early times. It feels like it’s from another time; it doesn’t feel like it’s in this life” (from an interview with Dr. Lauren Artress on the official Veriditas website).

Perhaps as a throwback to the old goddess worship, many prayer labyrinths contain feminine symbols in the center. Dr. Artress recognizes the symbolism and speaks freely of connecting with the “sacred feminine” in a labyrinth and of the need to view God as both a “he” and a “she.”

Are prayer labyrinths biblical? No, they are not. Not only are labyrinths never mentioned in the Bible, but they also conflict with several biblical principles of worship and prayer.

- 1) God seeks those who will worship Him in spirit and in truth ([John 4:24](#); [Philippians 3:3](#); [Psalm 29:2](#)). Proponents of prayer labyrinths speak of “body worship” and the goal to employ all five senses in worship. But body worship is not a biblical concept. We live by faith, not by sight, and worship is not a sensuous, physical activity; worship is a matter of the heart, expressed in praise and service to God. For the New Testament believer, worship has nothing to do with external trappings such as lighting candles, kneeling at an altar, or walking in circles.
- 2) Prayer is not to become ritualistic ([Matthew 6:5-8](#)). Dr. Artress says that “ritual feeds the soul” and recommends repeated, regular trips through the labyrinth. If ritual were truly food for the soul, then the Pharisees of Jesus’ day should have been the best-fed souls alive—after all, their religious system abounded in ritual and tradition. Yet Jesus rebuked them on more than one occasion for the deadness and hypocrisy of their religion ([Matthew 15:3](#); [Mark 7:6-13](#)).
- 3) Every believer has the mind of Christ ([1 Corinthians 2:16](#)). Many who walk prayer labyrinths are seeking special insight, new revelation, or a discovery of “the God who’s within.” Such an emphasis on mysticism and esoteric knowledge comes dangerously close to Gnosticism and New Age thinking. The Christian has no need of mystical experience or extra-biblical revelation: “You have an anointing from the Holy One, and all of you know the truth” ([1 John 2:20](#)).
- 4) God is near to all those who call upon Him in truth ([Psalm 145:18](#); [Acts 17:27](#)). No ritual, including walking a labyrinth, can bring anyone any closer to God. Jesus is the way ([John 14:6](#)). Repentance and faith are what is required ([Acts 20:21](#)).
- 5) The Bible is sufficient to make the Christian holy, wise, and completely proficient for his work in this world ([2 Timothy 3:15-17](#)). To say that, in order to find real power, we must add mysticism or tradition to the Bible is to denigrate God’s Word and the Spirit’s work through it.

Historically, labyrinths were rooted in paganism and incorporated by Catholicism. Now they are promoted by the Emergent Church and others who seek an open spirituality apart from the Bible. Paul’s warning to the church should suffice to keep us focused on Jesus and avoid empty ritual: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ” ([Colossians 2:8](#)).

Recommended Resource: [The Prayer That Turns the World Upside Down: The Lord's Prayer as a Manifesto for Revolution by R. Albert Mohler Jr.](#)

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